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AUTHOR Pihl, Marshall R.
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ABSTRACT

While Chinese was, by and large, the formal and public literary language of the Korean court and aristocracy, native Korean literature survived as an oral tradition in the more informal and private realms of life. The Yi Dynasty which lasted until the Japanese annexation of 1910, produced and recorded a rich treasury of Chinese and Korean literature. The Korean poet seems to have escaped the full impact of China sent influences, but the writer of fiction used the Chinese language, form, theme and setting. By the 19th century the Koreans had moved from the Chinese standard towards a discovery of the possibilities of the Korean experience. Korean literature went through a period of traumatic and irreversible change during the Era of Enlightenment, dated from the 1884 Reforms to the annexation by Japan in 1910. This period is marked by modernization and gave rise to the "New Literature". The late 1920's and early '30s saw the growth of another movement that was to have a profound effect; that of the politically left oriented, Proletarian Literature Movement. The current movement of writers are deeply involved in the conditions that surround them. (Author/AM)

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KOREAN LITERATURE

by Marshall R. Pihl

Scant records of the early Korean Kingdom tell us little of ancient Korean literature. We hear nothing of fiction. But of poetry we are told of some fifty pieces scattered over the years from 17 B.C. to the end of the tenth century. The reigning poetic form of those days, the hyangga ("native song") is represented by some 25 extant examples. These brief six- to twelve-line poems had a strong religious coloration -- predominantly Buddhist but including as well some Chinese Taoist thought and native Korean Shamanism. Since the Koreans had not yet devised their own script, the hyangga are noteworthy also for the means which was used to record them -- a system of Chinese characters selected to represent certain native Korean syllables without regard for the original Chinese meaning associated with each character.

Ironically though the selfsame culture that gave Koreans this first means to record their early literature also inundated them with its own already highly developed literary forms and attitudes. This meant that Korean writers found themselves abandoning their own native genius for a set of Chinese literary notions that were to dominate their creative output until the end of the nineteenth century. As a result, many leading Korean writers for hundreds of years were writing in Chinese -- often so indistinguishably from the work of the Chinese themselves that Korea was sometimes even called "Little China."

While Chinese was, by and large, the formal and public literary expression of the Korean court and aristocracy, native Korean literature survived nonetheless as an oral tradition in the more informal and private realms of life. And with the introduction of a proper Korean script in 1446 the oral literature could at last be recorded and lengthy prose composition in Korean could be attempted. Hence the Yi dynasty, which was established in 1392 and lasted until the Japanese annexation of 1910, produced and recorded a rich treasury of literature -- both in Chinese and in Korean. But since the latter of course is the more directly and fully evocative of Korean sensibilities, it should receive the first consideration of a student seeking the native essence of Korean literature.

Yi dynasty compilers preserved a number of poems of the preceding Koryo dynasty (918-1392), among which the popular songs in the changga ("long song") style are the most memorable as honest expressions of the poet's heart and mind where he sang easily of his passions, opening up his inner feelings to us. Once established thus in the Koryo dynasty, poetry of length was to reappear during the Yi dynasty in the form of the lyrically descriptive kasa verses.

The major poetic form of the Yi dynasty, however, was the three-line sijo, a popular verse form which any gentleman or courtesan could toss off whenever occasion demanded. Most of these poems, as a matter of fact, are associated with a specific personal experience in the poet's life. In contrast with the hyangga form which had been derived in part from Chinese models, the sijo was derived originally from native Korean folk songs. Even in modern times, the sijo has enjoyed several revivals and has exerted influence on both the form and technique of modern poetry. All told, this form of verse has probably been more used than

any other through the ages and is still very much a living thing. As the translator of sijo Richard Rutt comments, ". . . you have only to murmur the opening phrase of a famous sijo at a city bus stop to have the shoeshine boys finish it triumphantly."

A flexible syllable-count and a freedom from restrictive rules of accent and rhyme let the Korean sijo poet fill his verses with a vivid, living language which can express his oftentimes impassioned subjectivity. It is a first-person poetry in search of a compassionate ear. The subject-matter of sijo, wholly non-religious, ranges from Confucian social philosophy to praise of the rustic life without forgetting politics or the joys of wine and fraternity.

While the Korean poet seems to have escaped the full impact of China-sent influences, the writer of fiction -- addicted to the easy opiate of Chinese learning -- idled in the role of a skilled but self-obliterating craftsman whose work was almost uniformly Chinese in language, form, theme, and setting. The first departure from these conventional forms and attitudes was achieved with a vernacular novella by the scholar Ho Kyun, The Tale of Hong Kil-tong, which was written in the early 17th century, sometime between 1609 and 1618. Not only was this work remarkable for its use of the Korean language, but is was also a major piece of social criticism in a time of political repression. Another pioneer and advocate of vernacular fiction was Kim Man-jung who lived a half-century after Ho Kyun and is remembered today for his full-length novel, Nine Cloud Dream (1688)*, a fantastic tale set in China and drawing for its philosophy upon the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ways of thought.

The history of Korean fiction from Ho Kyun and Kim Man-jung through the flowering of the romantic novel in the late 19th century was, in a sense, the story of a movement away from the Chinese standard and toward a discovery, of the possibilities of the Korean experience. With the anonymous Tale of Ch'un-hyang (also known as The Fragrance of Spring), as it had developed by its late 19th century editions, the writer of fictional prose seemed to be finding a language for himself and discovering more possibilities for exploration in his characters than the simple question of their "good" or "evil." For the first time, long-held mainstream values of the non-aristocratice classes began to surface in popular literature in the wake of a social disintergration where the rigidly Confucian court and nobility were now losing their social authority. Thus the China-oriented literary forms and themes of the noble class succumbed to the warm humor and open sensualism of the lower class vernacular literature.

Korean literature went through a period of traumatic and irreversible change during the so-called Era of Englightenment which is dated from the 1884 Reforms to the annexation by Japan in 1910. Like other branches of Korean culture, literature, too, embarked on its own modernization under the title, "New Literature." The new Western European literary ideas flowing into Korea, directly and also through Japan, were quickly embraced by the young writers in particular who, at the same time, rejected

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*Now in a new translation by Richard Rutt, sponsored by the Literature Program of the Asia Society.

the traditional forms of drama, poetry, and fiction. These new influences firally produced fruit in the early years of this century: the first "new novel," Tears of Blood, appeared as a newspaper serial in 1906; the first "new poem," "To Youth from the Seam" appeared in a literary magazine in 1908; and the first "new drama," Silver World, was presented in Seoul in November, 1908.

These "new" writings are best considered as transitional forms, for they have little to recommend them as literature. It wasn't until the appearance of 1917 of Yi Kwang-su's novel, Heartless, that modern fiction had found a real beginning in Korea. In poetry, also, a decade's maturation finally brought it to the threshold of real modernity, marked by the work of Chu Yo-han and Kim Ok.

During the next two decades preceding the Second World War, both poetry and prose seethed in the ferment of new ideas which were pouring into Korea from Europe one after the other. While poets dizzily experimented with symbolism, decadentisme, and romanticism, novelists were trying to achieve a Korean naturalism. But the late 1920's and early 1930's saw the growth of another movement -- one of international proportions -- that was to have a profound effect on the subsequent direction of Korean literature, both poetry and prose: the politically left-oriented, Proletarian Literature Movement. Not only did this new concept split the Korean literary world into open debate, but it finally moved a threatened Japanese colonial government to take repressive measures which drove many a writer away from social questions and into the refuge of "pure," art-for-art's-sake literature. The ultimate proscription of all public use of the Korean language during the war-filled 'forties' marked the beginning of a dark age from which literature did not emerge until after the end of the Korean War in the middle'fifties.'

A new generation of Korean writers has now appeared, one which knows little or nothing of the Japanese occupation nor of the colonial mentality, one which has seen the world as it is without dependence upon the Japanese translators and professors. They are war-tested and deeply involved in the conditions that surround them.

KOREAN LITERATURE

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